THE COLLECTED WORKS OF

HENRIK IBSEN

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VOLUME XI

LITTLE EYOLF
JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN
WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY

WILLIAM ARCHER

LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN
1921

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WILLIAM ARCHER

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LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
21 BEDFORD STREET, W.C. 2

LITTLE EYOLF.

INTRODUCTION.

Little Eyolf was written in Christiania during 1894, and published in Copenhagen on December 11 in that year. By this time Ibsen's correspondence has become so scanty as to afford us no clue to what may be called the biographical antecedents of the play. Even of anecdotic history very little attaches to it. For only one of the characters has a definite model been suggested. Ibsen himself told his French translator, Count Prozor, that the original of the Rat-Wife was "a little old woman who came to kill rats at the school where he was educated. She carried a little dog in a bag, and it was said that children had been drowned through following her." This means that Ibsen did not himself adapt to his uses the legend so familiar to us in Browning's *Pied Piper of Hamelin*, but found it ready adapted by the popular imagination of his native place, Skien. "This idea," Ibsen continued to Count Prozor, "was just what I wanted for bringing about the disappearance of Little Eyolf, in whom the infatuation [1] and the feebleness of his

[1] The French word used by Count Prozor is "infatuation." I can think of no other rendering for it; but I do not quite know what it means as applied to Allmers and Eyolf.

father are reproduced, but concentrated, exaggerated, as one often sees them in the son of such a father." Dr. Elias tells us that a well-known lady-artist, who in middle life suggested to him the figure of Lona Hessel, was in later years the model for the Rat-Wife. There is no inconsistency between these two accounts of the matter. The idea was doubtless suggested by his recollection of the rat-catcher of Skien, while traits of manner and physiognomy might be borrowed from the lady in question.

The verse quoted on pp. 52 and 53 is the last line of a very well-known poem by Johan Sebastian Welhaven, entitled *Republikanerne*, written in 1839. An unknown guest in a Paris restaurant has been challenged by a noisy party of young Frenchmen to join them in drinking a health to Poland. He refuses; they denounce him as a craven and a slave; he bares his breast and shows the scars of wounds received in fighting for the country whose lost cause has become a subject for conventional enthusiasm and windy rhetoric.

"De saae paa hverandre. Han vandred sin vei.
De havde champagne, men rörte den ei."

"They looked at each other. He went on his way. There stood their champagne, but they did not touch it." The champagne incident leads me to wonder whether the relation between Rita and Allmers may not have been partly suggested to Ibsen by the relation between Charlotte Stieglitz and her weakling of a husband. Their story must have been known to him through George Brandes's *Young Germany*, if not more directly. "From time to time," says Dr. Brandes, "there came over her what she calls her champagne-mood; she grieves that this is no longer

the case with him."[1] Did the germ of the incident lie in these words?

The first performance of the play in Norway took place at the Christiania Theatre on January 15, 1895, Fru Wettergreen playing Rita and Fru Dybwad, Asta. In Copenhagen (March 13, 1895) Fru Oda Nielsen and Fru Hennings played Rita and Asta respectively, while Emil Poulsen played Allmers. The first German Rita (Deutsches Theater, Berlin, January 12, 1895) was Frau Agnes Sorma, with Reicher as Allmers. Six weeks later Frl. Sandrock played Rita at the Burgtheater, Vienna. In May 1895 the play was acted by M. Lugné-Poë's company in Paris. The first performance in English took place at the Avenue Theatre, London, on the afternoon of November 23, 1896, with Miss Janet Achurch as Rita, Miss Elizabeth Robins as Asta, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell as the Rat-Wife. Miss Achurch's Rita made a profound impression. Mrs. Patrick Campbell afterwards played the part in a short series of evening performances. In the spring of 1895 the play was acted in Chicago by a company of Scandinavian amateurs, presumably in Norwegian. Fru Oda Nielsen has recently (I understand) given some performances of it in New York, and Madame Alla Nazimova has announced it for production during the coming season (1907–1908).

As the external history of *Little Eyolf* is so short, I am tempted to depart from my usual practice, and say a few words as to its matter and meaning.

George Brandes, writing of this play, has rightly observed that "a kind of dualism has always been perceptible in Ibsen; he pleads the cause of Nature and he castigates Nature with mystic morality; only

[1] *Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature*, vol. vi. p. 299.

sometimes Nature is allowed the first voice, sometimes morality. In *The Master Builder* and in *Ghosts* the lover of Nature in Ibsen was predominant; here, as in *Brand* and *The Wild Duck*, the castigator is in the ascendant." So clearly is this the case in *Little Eyolf* that Ibsen seems almost to fall into line with Mr. Thomas Hardy. To say nothing of analogies of detail between *Little Eyolf* and *Jude the Obscure*, there is this radical analogy, that they are both utterances of a profound pessimism, both indictments of Nature.

But while Mr. Hardy's pessimism is plaintive and passive, Ibsen's is stoical and almost bracing. It is true that in this play he is no longer the mere "indignation-pessimist" whom Dr. Brandes quite justly recognised in his earlier works. His analysis has gone deeper into the heart of things, and he has put off the satirist and the iconoclast. But there is in his thought an incompressible energy of revolt. A pessimist in contemplation, he remains a meliorist in action. He is not, like Mr. Hardy, content to let the flag droop half-mast high; his protagonist still runs it up to the mast-head, and looks forward steadily to the "heavy day of work" before him. But although the note of the conclusion is resolute, almost serene, the play remains none the less an indictment of Nature, or at least of that egoism of passion which is one of her most potent subtleties. In this view, Allmers becomes a type of what we may roughly call the "free moral agent"; Eyolf, a type of humanity conceived as passive and suffering, thrust will-less into existence, with boundless aspirations and cruelly limited powers; Rita, a type of the egoistic instinct which is "a consuming fire"; and Asta, a type of the beneficent love which is possible only so long as it is exempt from "the law of change." Allmers, then, is self-conscious

egoism, egoism which can now and then break its chains, look in its own visage, realise and shrink from itself; while Rita, until she has passed through the awful crisis which forms the matter of the play, is unconscious, reckless, and ruthless egoism, exigent and jealous, "holding to its rights," and incapable even of rising into the secondary stage of maternal love. The offspring and the victim of these egoisms is Eyolf, "little wounded warrior," who longs to scale the heights and dive into the depths, but must remain for ever chained to the crutch of human infirmity. For years Allmers has been a restless and half-reluctant slave to Rita's imperious temperament. He has dreamed and theorised about "responsibility," and has kept Eyolf poring over his books, in the hope that, despite his misfortune, he may one day minister to parental vanity. Finally he breaks away from Rita, for the first time "in all these ten years," goes up "into the infinite solitudes," looks Death in the face, and returns shrinking from passion, yearning towards selfless love, and filled with a profound and remorseful pity for the lot of poor maimed humanity. He will "help Eyolf to bring his desires into harmony with what lies attainable before him." He will "create a conscious happiness in his mind." And here the drama opens.

Before the Rat-Wife enters, let me pause for a moment to point out that here again Ibsen adopts that characteristic method which, in writing of *The Lady from the Sea* and *The Master Builder*, I have compared to the method of Hawthorne. The story he tells is not really, or rather not inevitably, supernatural. Everything is explicable within the limits of nature; but supernatural agency is also vaguely suggested, and the reader's imagination is stimulated,

without any absolute violence to his sense of reality. On the plane of everyday life, then, the Rat-Wife is a crazy and uncanny old woman, fabled by the peasants to be a were-wolf in her leisure moments, who goes about the country killing vermin. Coming across an impressionable child, she tells him a preposterous tale, adapted from the old "Pied Piper" legends, of her method of fascinating her victims. The child, whose imagination has long dwelt on this personage, is in fact hypnotised by her, follows her down to the sea, and, watching her row away, turns dizzy, falls in, and is drowned. There is nothing impossible, nothing even improbable, in this. At the same time, there cannot be the least doubt, I think, that in the poet's mind the Rat-Wife is the symbol of Death, of the "still, soft darkness" that is at once so fearful and so fascinating to humanity. This is clear not only in the text of her single scene, but in the fact that Allmers, in the last act, treats her and his "fellow-traveller" of that night among the mountains, not precisely as identical, but as interchangeable, ideas. To tell the truth, I have even my own suspicions as to who is meant by "her sweetheart," whom she "lured" long ago, and who is now "down where all the rats are." This theory I shall keep to myself; it may be purely fantastic, and is at best inessential. What is certain is that death carries off Little Eyolf, and that, of all he was, only the crutch is left, mute witness to his hapless lot.

He is gone; there was so little to bind him to life that he made not even a moment's struggle against the allurement of the "long, sweet sleep." Then, for the first time, the depth of the egoism which had created and conditioned his little life bursts upon his parents' horror-stricken gaze. Like accomplices in

crime, they turn upon and accuse each other—"sorrow makes them wicked and hateful." Allmers, as the one whose eyes were already half opened, is the first to carry war into the enemy's country; but Rita is not slow to retort, and presently they both have to admit that their recriminations are only a vain attempt to drown the voice of self-reproach. In a sort of fierce frenzy they tear away veil after veil from their souls, until they realise that Eyolf never existed at all, so to speak, for his own sake, but only for the sake of their passions and vanities. "Isn't it curious," says Rita, summing up the matter, "that we should grieve like this over a little stranger boy?"

In blind self-absorption they have played with life and death, and now "the great open eyes" of the stranger boy will be for ever upon them. Allmers would fain take refuge in a love untainted by the egoism, and unexposed to the revulsions, of passion But not only is Asta's pity for Rita too strong to let her countenance this desertion: she has discovered that her relation to Allmers is *not* "exempt from the law of change," and she "takes flight from him—and, from herself." Meanwhile it appears that the agony which Allmers and Rita have endured in probing their wounds has been, as Halvard Solness would say, "salutary self-torture." The consuming fire of passion is now quenched, but "it has left an empty place within them," and they feel a common need "to fill it up with something that is a little like love." They come to remember that there are other children in the world on whom reckless instinct has thrust the gift of life—neglected children, stunted and maimed in mind if not in body. And now that her egoism is seared to the quick, the mother-instinct asserts itself in Rita. She will take these children to her—these

children to whom her hand and her heart have hitherto been closed. They shall be outwardly in Eyolf's place, and perhaps in time they may fill the place in her heart that should have been Eyolf's. Thus she will try to "make her peace with the great open eyes." For now, at last, she has divined the secret of the unwritten book on "human responsibility," and has realised that motherhood means—atonement.

So I read this terrible and beautiful work of art. This, I think, is *a* meaning inherent in it—not perhaps *the* meaning, and still less all the meanings. Indeed, its peculiar fascination for me, among all Ibsen's works, lies in the fact that it seems to touch life at so many different points. But I must not be understood as implying that Ibsen constructed the play with any such definitely allegoric design as is here set forth. I do not believe that this creator of men and women ever started from an abstract conception. He did not first compose his philosophic tune and then set his puppets dancing to it. The germ in his mind was dramatic, not ethical; it was only as the drama developed that its meanings dawned upon him; and he left them implicit and fragmentary, like the symbolism of life itself, seldom formulated, never worked out with schematic precision. He simply took a cutting from the tree of life, and, planting it in the rich soil of his imagination, let it ramify and burgeon as it would.

Even if one did not know the date of *Little Eyolf*, one could confidently assign it to the latest period of Ibsen's career, on noting a certain difference of scale between its foundations and its superstructure. In his earlier plays, down to and including *Hedda Gabler*, we feel his invention at work to the very last moment, often with more intensity in the last act than in the

first; in his later plays he seems to be in haste to pass as early as possible from invention to pure analysis. In this play, after the death of Eyolf (surely one of the most inspired "situations" in all drama) there is practically no external action whatsoever. Nothing happens save in the souls of the characters; there is no further invention, but rather what one may perhaps call inquisition. This does not prevent the second act from being quite the most poignant or the third act from being one of the most moving that Ibsen ever wrote. Far from wishing to depreciate the play, I rate it more highly, perhaps, than most critics—among the very greatest of Ibsen's achievements. I merely note as a characteristic of the poet's latest manner this disparity of scale between the work foreshadowed, so to speak, and the work completed. We shall find it still more evident in the case of *John Gabriel Borkman*.

JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN.

INTRODUCTION.

THE anecdotic history of *John Gabriel Borkman* is even scantier than that of *Little Eyolf*. It is true that two mentions of it occur in Ibsen's letters, but they throw no light whatever upon its spiritual antecedents. Writing to George Brandes from Christiania, on April 24, 1896, Ibsen says: "In your last letter you make the suggestion that I should visit London. If I knew enough English, I might perhaps go. But as I unfortunately do not, I must give up the idea altogether. Besides, I am engaged in preparing for a big new work, and I do not wish to put off the writing of it longer than necessary. It might so easily happen that a roof-tile fell on my head before I had 'found time to make the last verse.' And what then?" On October 3 of the same year, writing to the same correspondent, he again alludes to his work at "a new long play, which must be completed as soon as possible." It was, as a matter of fact, completed with very little delay, for it appeared in Copenhagen on December 15, 1896.

The irresponsible gossip of the time made out that Björnson discerned in the play some personal allusions to himself; but this Björnson emphatically denied.

I am not aware that any attempt has been made to identify the originals of the various characters. It need scarcely be pointed out that in the sisters Gunhild and Ella we have the pair of women, one strong and masterful, the other tender and devoted, who run through so many of Ibsen's plays, from *The Feast at Solhoug* onwards—nay, even from *Catilina*. In my Introduction to *The Lady from the Sea* (p. xxii) it is pointed out that Ibsen had the character of Foldal clearly in his mind when, in March 1880, he made the first draft of that play. The character there appears as: "The old married clerk. Has written a play in his youth which was only once acted. Is for ever touching it up, and lives in the illusion that it will be published and will make a great success. Takes no steps, however, to bring this about. Nevertheless accounts himself one of the 'literary' class. His wife and children believe blindly in the play." By the time Foldal actually came to life, the faith of his wife and children had sadly dwindled away.

There was scarcely a theatre in Scandinavia or Finland at which *John Gabriel Borkman* was not acted in the course of January 1897. Helsingfors led the way with performances both at the Swedish and at the Finnish Theatres on January 10. Christiania and Stockholm followed on January 25, Copenhagen on January 31; and meanwhile the piece had been presented at many provincial theatres as well. In Christiania, Borkman, Gunhild, and Ella were played by Garmann, Fru Gundersen, and Fröken Reimers respectively; in Copenhagen, by Emil Poulsen, Fru Eckhardt, and Fru Hennings. In the course of 1897 it spread all over Germany, beginning with Frankfort on Main, where, oddly enough, it was somewhat maltreated by the Censorship. In London, an organisa-

tion calling itself the New Century Theatre presented *John Gabriel Borkman* at the Strand Theatre on the afternoon of May 3, 1897, with Mr. W. H. Vernon as Borkman, Miss Geneviève Ward as Gunhild, Miss Elizabeth Robins as Ella Rentheim, Mr. Martin Harvey as Erhart, Mr. James Welch as Foldal, and Mrs. Beerbohm Tree as Mrs. Wilton. The first performance in America was given by the Criterion Independent Theatre of New York on November 18, 1897, Mr. E. J. Henley playing Borkman, Mr. John Blair Erhart, Miss Maude Banks Gunhild, and Miss Ann Warrington Ella. For some reason, which I can only conjecture to be the weakness of the third act, the play seems nowhere to have taken a very firm hold on the stage.

Dr. Brahm has drawn attention to the great similarity between the theme of *John Gabriel Borkman* and that of *Pillars of Society*. "In both," he says, "we have a business man of great ability who is guilty of a crime; in both this man is placed between two sisters; and in both he renounces a marriage of inclination for the sake of a marriage that shall further his business interests." The likeness is undeniable; and yet how utterly unlike are the two plays! and how immeasurably superior the later one! It may seem, on a superficial view, that in *John Gabriel Borkman* Ibsen has returned to prose and the common earth after his excursion into poetry and the possibly supernatural, if I may so call it, in *The Master Builder* and *Little Eyolf*. But this is a very superficial view indeed. We have only to compare the whole invention of *John Gabriel Borkman* with the invention of *Pillars of Society*, to realise the difference between the poetry and the prose of drama. The quality of imagination which conceived the story of the House of Bernick

is utterly unlike that which conceived the tragedy of the House of Borkman. The difference is not greater between (say) *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*.

The technical feat which Ibsen here achieves of carrying through without a single break the whole action of a four-act play has been much commented on and admired. The imaginary time of the drama is actually shorter than the real time of representation, since the poet does not even leave intervals for the changing of the scenes. This feat, however, is more curious than important. Nothing particular is gained by such a literal observance of the unity of time. For the rest, we feel definitely in *John Gabriel Borkman* what we already felt vaguely in *Little Eyolf*—that the poet's technical staying-power is beginning to fail him. We feel that the initial design was larger and more detailed than the finished work. If the last acts of *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* be compared with the last acts of *Little Eyolf* and *Borkman*, it will be seen that in the earlier plays his constructive faculty is working at its highest tension up to the very end, while in the later plays it relaxes towards the close, to make room for pure imagination and lyric beauty. The actual drama is over long before the curtain falls on either play, and in the one case we have Rita and Allmers, in the other Ella and Borkman, looking back over their shattered lives and playing chorus to their own tragedy. For my part, I set the highest value on these choral odes, these mournful antiphonies, in which the poet definitely triumphs over the mere playwright. They seem to me noble and beautiful in themselves, and as truly artistic, if not as theatrical, as any abrupter catastrophe could be. But I am not quite sure that they are exactly the conclusions the poet originally pro-

jected, and still less am I satisfied that they are reached by precisely the paths which he at first designed to pursue.

The traces of a change of scheme in *John Gabriel Borkman* seem to me almost unmistakable. The first two acts laid the foundation for a larger and more complex superstructure than is ultimately erected. Ibsen seems to have designed that Hinkel, the man who "betrayed" Borkman in the past, should play some efficient part in the alienation of Erhart from his family and home. Otherwise, why this insistence on a "party" at the Hinkels', which is apparently to serve as a sort of "send-off" for Erhart and Mrs. Wilton? It appears in the third act that the "party" was imaginary. "Erhart and I were the whole party," says Mrs. Wilton, "and little Frida, of course." We might, then, suppose it to have been a mere blind to enable Erhart to escape from home; but, in the first place, as Erhart does not live at home, there is no need for any such pretext; in the second place, it appears that the trio do actually go to the Hinkels' house (since Mrs. Borkman's servant finds them there), and do actually make it their starting-point. Erhart comes and goes with the utmost freedom in Mrs. Wilton's own house; what possible reason can they have for not setting out from there? No reason is shown or hinted. We cannot even imagine that the Hinkels have been instrumental in bringing Erhart and Mrs. Wilton together; it is expressly stated that Erhart made her acquaintance and saw a great deal of her in town, before she moved out into the country. The whole conception of the party at the Hinkels' is, as it stands, mysterious and a little cumbersome. We are forced to conclude, I think, that something more was at one time intended to